

Forecasting Shortgrass Weather No Longer Attempted By Amateurs

By Monte Noelke

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MERTZON — At this writing the shortgrass country has just had what may have been the longest wet spell since prehistoric oceans lapped over this region of fickle climate. However, few people are cured of their anxiety over the moisture supply.

Of all the mysteries which enshroud this land the Lipan Apaches called the "Big Fallow Hunting Grounds," its weather is by far the most incomprehensible. Meteorologists long ago learned that one week might be blighted by a drouth so severe that an honor graduate of the Southwest's best beauty college couldn't twirl a spit curl, and then, in a matter of hours, the draws and creeks could be running bank full. They observed such phenomena as 25,000 acre-feet of cloud-supported water drifting over the rangelands every 12 hours without one drop ever hitting the parched ground. At such times the ceiling may be windmill-high for a week, and an outlander would bet a new pair of boots against a snow cone that it couldn't keep from coming a flood that would have shaken the faith of Noah, yet the clouds can float on to other climes and the shortgrass country will remain as dry as an old maid's wig.

In former days a number of things were thought to be useful in predicting wet years. The Indians, for example, believed that when a century plant bloomed near an old tomahawk burial ground, it was high time to waterproof, their bows and arrows with resin. They also held that if a lizard shed his skin three times in a single week, a regular teepee-floater was close at hand.

The Indians' weather beliefs worked just fine until the white settlers had been in the area long enough to discover why the savages hadn't been more savage in resisting their conquest. But soon the pioneers were poking holes in what they called superstitions and what the enlightened younger Indians labeled old medicine men's tales.

The century plant theory was denounced in a settler's statement that anybody with enough sense to inhale a peace pipe should have more judgment than to believe the shortgrass country had such a dependable rainfall pattern. Young smart alec Indians clapped their hands and sprained their necks nodding agreement.

The white men, encouraged by the young braves' applause, made even shorter work of the lizard theory. They tore this ancient belief to pieces by revealing that in all reptiledom there is nothing as personal to a lizard as the act of shedding his own skin. Furthermore according to founding fathers, anyone so stupid as to believe that a cold blood animal was going to share the high pint of his whole existence by predicting weather for humans was sufficiently naive to fall for the old hocus-pocus being put out by the white men at the land treaty conclaves.

As you may have already guessed, the young Indians greeted this with wild dancing and fierce shouting; many of them actually popped their necks out of joint nodding agreement.

But the Indians weren't and aren't the only people using signs to forecast weather. Ranchers once were demons in the field of observing actions of animals and insects and relating them to coming changes in the weather. Their methods ranged from counting the strands in a spider web and multiplying the total by pi, to heading for high ground at sight of a skunk taking a daylight stroll. If a yellow-throated blackbird was observed roosting on a corral fence, the oldtimer rancher began to draw up plans for arks and tree houses. And if cattle or sheep were seen bedding down on a hillside in the daytime, Billy Graham couldn't have persuaded local residents they should buy a little drouth insurance.

But belief in all these signs and symbols has now disappeared. Nothing is considered reliable. Oh, occasionally some hombre may cock his eye toward a cloud bank in the east and mutter that the Almanac says the sun might be shaded tomorrow. But amateur forecasting of the sort that was once the passion of the countryside is no more.

In a way it's just as well. The shortgrasser needs every ounce of his strength and alertness to deal with immediate conditions, without wasting his energy thinking what might happen in the future.